ความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ: องค์ประกอบ ผลกระทบ และแนวทางการแก้ปัญหา

ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM ANXIETY: COMPONENTS, EFFECTS, AND SOLUTIONS

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บทคัดย่อ

ความวิตกกังวลถือเป็นตัวแปรหรือปัจจัยที่สำคัญประการหนึ่งที่ส่งผลต่อกระบวนการเรียนรู้ภาษา
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แนะสำหรับอาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษเกี่ยวกับกลวิธีในการจัดการกับความวิตกกังวล เพื่อช่วยส่งเสริม
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ต่อผู้เรียน

คำสำคัญ: ความวิตกกังวลในการเรียนภาษา องค์ประกอบ ผลกระทบ แนวทางการแก้ปัญหา

Abstract

Anxiety is one of the affective variables that can influence students' language learning
process and second or foreign language achievement. This article critically reviews the literature
that examined the potential factors involved in language anxiety including three components: the
teacher, the environment, and the student. The other theme that is described in this review is
four major effects of anxiety on foreign language learning and performance, that is, academic,
cognitive, social, and personal effects. English language teachers are recommended to enhance
their students' performance and reduce language classroom anxiety by creating a friendly and
relaxing classroom atmosphere, encouraging students' involvement in pair and group work activities
and providing appropriate and useful activities for their students.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Components, Effects, Solutions

Introduction

The current teaching and learning of English in Thailand is unsuccessful. When compared to neighboring countries, Thailand's English proficiency is at a low position. In 2015, the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2015) ranked Thailand in 62nd place out of 70 countries, with an average score of 45.35, and evaluated Thailand as having "very low proficiency."

Even though Thai students spend 9 to 12 years studying English in basic education, many of them do not achieve a high level of English competency. Punthumasen (2007) indicated that English teaching in Thai schools concentrates on reading and writing skills and therefore students are not sufficiently introduced to speaking and listening skills. Similarly, Simpson (2011) interestingly pointed out that English teaching in Thailand is teacher-centered and focuses on accuracy of grammar and vocabulary.

Some researchers have attempted to explore other factors that contribute to unsuccessful English teaching and learning in Thailand. For example, Mackenzie (2002) found that the characteristics of Thai students that lead to ineffective English language learning are being shy and lacking motivation to communicate in English, exacerbated by the focus on grammar, and relying on rote memorization.

The success or failure of learning a foreign language can be attributed to many factors. Recently, increasing focus has been given to affective variables, including the anxiety, attitudes, and motivation which influence language achievement (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992, 1993a; Skehan, 1989, 1991; Spolsky, 1989 as cited in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994).

Over the past twenty years, foreign language researchers and educators have increasingly focused their attention on foreign language anxiety (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000). A virtual explosion of research has been seen in the topic of language anxiety, and a number of articles published show the negative effects of anxiety on the language-learning process. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) found that anxious students learn a list of vocabulary items at a slower rate than less anxious students and have more difficulty in the recall of previously-learned vocabulary items. Additionally, Crookall and Oxford (1991) explained that extreme language learning anxiety can cause other interlocking problems. For instance, it lowers students' self-esteem, reduces their confidence, strengthens inhibition, lessens willingness to take risks, and decreases the probability of achieving a high degree of language proficiency. Similarly, Young (1992) pointed out that low levels of achievement in the second language are associated with high levels of language anxiety.

It can be said then that anxiety plays an important role in foreign language learning. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to review the relevant literature. After a discussion of different definitions of anxiety, the components of the language classroom anxiety, the effects of anxiety on the learner's language achievement, and solutions for coping with language classroom anxiety will be described.

Language Anxiety: Definitions

In order to obtain a clearer understanding of anxiety, the definitions of anxiety given by researchers and psychologists are presented. Dworetzky (1991, p. 461) defined anxiety as the "apprehension, tension, or uneasiness that stems from the anticipation of danger, the source of which is largely unknown or unrecognized." As well, Schaie and Geiwitz (as cited in Sogunro,

1998, p. 110) defined anxiety as "an aroused state characterized by vague fears." In differentiating fear and anxiety, Goodwin (as cited in Sogunro, 1998, p. 110) agrees that "fear is a reaction to a specific danger while anxiety is unspecific, vague, and objectless."

When anxiety is restricted to the language-learning situation, it falls into specific types of anxiety reactions. The anxiety focused on in this paper specifically means language classroom anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) broadly described foreign language anxiety as the feeling of being uncomfortable, worried, nervous and apprehensive that happens while learning or using a second language. These feelings originate from any second language context associated with speaking, listening, reading, or writing skills.

The Main Components of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

This part of the paper focuses on three main components of the foreign language classroom that play a part in language classroom anxiety: the teacher, the environment, and the student. The following discussion is based on the study of foreign language anxiety.

The Teacher

The teacher plays an important role in the amount of anxiety each student experiences in the classroom. According to Lieberman (as cited in Matlin, 1995), when a teacher yells loudly at a young boy for his poor performance, then the teacher, the classroom, and even studying may provoke anxiety. Furthermore, Price (1991) noted that some teachers that criticize students' accents or high school teachers that walk around the classroom with a big stick and hit it on the desk of anyone that is not listening, yelling "Pay attention!," can increase the students' anxiety. Similarly, Young (1991) pointed out that some teachers believe that the teachers' role is to be a drill sergeant instead of being a facilitator; therefore, they feel that they need to correct students' errors immediately. Such opinions are in harmony with the study of Riasati (2011), and in his interviews with adult English language learners, it was revealed that the teacher is one of the powerful sources of language anxiety. The teacher has a crucial role in making the class comfortable or anxious. For example, if the teacher is very serious, bad tempered or impatient, it can create anxiety in the class environment.

Conversely, Sarawit (1996, p. 27) stated that "teachers can alleviate some of the classroom anxiety if they take into account the fears the students have about making errors in front of their peers and feeling foolish. Allowing errors and making students understand the need to experiment with the language where errors are a natural part of language development can help students." The teacher's personality is also considered as important in the foreign language classroom. In Bekleyen's (2007) study, she revealed that the teacher's kindness, being energetic, and listening with patience were quite important in creating a more relaxing classroom atmosphere. In agreement with this, Riasati's (2011) study concluded that teachers can play a crucial role in reducing the students' anxiety and making the classroom environment comfortable for the students by building a friendly relationship with them as friends. Additionally, Goshi (as cited in Marwan, 2007) advised that teachers should recognize students as individuals and should not use complicated instructions or competitive classroom procedures.

Additionally, Richards (1992) indicated that successful learning can be viewed as being dependent on the teacher's control and management of what takes place in the classroom. Further, Price (1991, p. 106), in her interviews with highly-anxious students, reported that one student complained in the following way:, "It was never be a learning experience. You either did it right or you didn't." Price (as cited in Sarawit, 1996, p. 27) further added the following:

> *Many students feel pressured by what they feel were impossible expectations of their teachers. Student must be made to realize that they are not expected to achieve a native accent and that errors are part of the learning process. The teacher can help student having more realistic expectations and by doing so lower their classroom anxiety is observed.*

In an attempt to reduce students' anxiety and frustration when communicating in the target language, Yang (2012) also recommended that the English language teachers focus more on the student's language competency rather than his or her proficiency. Using sociolinguistic skills, such as speech acts, turn-taking, conversational sequencing, and discourse strategies, can help students express their ideas in the class effectively.

In conclusion, it is clear that the teacher is one of the most important factors that can make students defensive and protect themselves or else simply lose their self-esteem, and be afraid of making mistakes. On the other hand, the teacher's good personality and closer teacher-student relationship can help decrease students' anxiety levels.

The Environment

Another related point to be considered in this part is the role of the environment in language classroom anxiety. Sarawit (1996, p. 27) stated that "the environment in which the student interacts with the language can be a powerful variable in heightening or lessening the language anxiety of the student. In host language environments the students arriving can physically suffer from culture and language shock when they are unable to deal with their new surroundings." For this discussion, the environment has been narrowed to the English language classroom, where the teachers and the students come together for the purpose of language learning.

It has been said that the classroom is a source of anxiety. Price (1991, p. 105), in her interviews with highly-anxious students, reported that "the greatest source of anxiety was having to speak the target language in front of their peers. Students all spoke of their fears of being laughed at by the others, of making a fool of themselves in public. Several had painful memories of being ridiculed by other students, particularly in secondary school language classes." In a similar study, Riasati (2011) revealed that being negatively evaluated by teachers as well as peers, getting an unacceptable score on the test, and being unfamiliar with the words, expressions and different intonation patterns of the teachers while listening are the major sources of anxiety.

Further, Daly (1991, p. 10) noted that "an alphabetical seating arrangement can bring panic to the apprehensive student who would prefer not to be noticed and envious anguish to the non-apprehensive student who would much prefer sitting in front where interaction is high." Additionally, Sarawit (1996) stated that teaching techniques, teaching methods, and teaching materials can be sources of anxiety.

The Student

Finally, we come to the student, the most important element in language classroom anxiety. According to Riasati (2011), most students experience anxiety when learning a foreign language, especially in the English language classes where the language is expected to be spoken. It seems that many students suffer from a high level of anxiety, which results in unwillingness to make mistakes in front of peers and frustration due to the inability to express their ideas.

Moreover, Price (1991) reported that many students are shy about making errors in pronunciation and stressing the wrong words and sentences. They think that they cannot pronounce words like a native speaker and express great embarrassment at their terrible pronunciation. Furthermore, they believe that their language skills are weaker than those of their peers and they cannot do a good job; thus, everyone looks down on them.

Additionally, many students reflect that "one of their major worries is that when forced to use the language they are learning they constantly feel that they are representing themselves badly, showing only some of their real personality, only some of their real intelligence" (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 173). Similarly, Woodrow (2006), in her interviews with Asian university students in Australia, found that 85% of students experience English language speaking anxiety when performing in front of classmates, giving oral presentations, and talking to native speakers.
In a similar study, Marwan (2007) investigated Indonesian students' foreign language anxiety. The findings showed that the primary sources of language anxiety were the students' lack of confidence, lack of preparation, and fear of failing the class. On the other hand, Riasati (2011) suggested that the students themselves can help reduce their foreign language classroom anxiety—they can prepare sufficiently for each class session, be actively involved in the class activities, and increase their self-confidence.

The Effects of Anxiety on Language Learning

Many language teachers have long been aware of the fact that many of their students experience discomfort in the course of language learning; they especially suffer from a high level of anxiety, which prevents them from performing successfully in the foreign language class. Since anxiety can have profound effects on many aspects of foreign language learning, this part of the paper examines the effects of anxiety on language learning. According to MacIntyre (1998), there are four major effects of anxiety on foreign language learning. Each of these effects: academic effects, cognitive effects, social effects, and personal effects, is presented below.

Academic Effects

Several studies (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; and Young, 1986 as cited in MacIntyre, 1998) have investigated the relation between language anxiety and language course grades. Their studies have all shown significant negative correlations between language anxiety and grades in a variety of language courses; therefore, high levels of language anxiety are associated with low levels of academic achievement in the second or foreign language course.

Most studies seeking more specific effects of anxiety on language learning have shown particularly interesting results. Steinberg and Horwitz (as cited in Ganschow and Sparks, 1996) for example studied the effects of anxiety on oral communication in a foreign language and found that students experiencing an anxiety-producing situation tried to transfer more concrete messages than those in a non-anxiety-producing condition. That is, more anxious students are likely to avoid producing difficult or personal messages in the target language. In much the same way, Daly and Miller (as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1991, p. 28) indicated that "students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less than their calmer counterparts do."

Cognitive Effects

A model of the effects of anxiety arousal on learning from instruction in a language classroom was explained by Tobias (1979, 1980, and 1986 as cited in MacIntyre, 1998). He noted that there were three stages in language learning; namely, the input stage, the processing stage, and the output stage. At the input stage, anxiety plays the role of a filter in terms of preventing some information from getting into the cognitive processing system. For example, highly anxious students may not be able to receive, concentrate on, or encode external stimuli. They may ask for sentences to be repeated more than one time or may have to reread a text several times in order to compensate for the missing input. During the processing stage, anxiety can influence both the speed and accuracy of learning; students may not be able to learn new words, phrases, grammar, and so on when they are worried. Anxiety arousal at the output stage can influence the quality of second language communication. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1991, p. 29), "many students know a certain grammar point but forget it during a test or an oral exercise when many grammar points must be remembered and coordinated simultaneously. They usually know the correct answer after finishing the test, but put down the wrong one due to nervousness."

Social Effects

Language anxiety can also be influenced by the social context, such as high competition in the classroom, difficult teacher-learner interactions, classroom embarrassment, and opportunity for communication with native speakers (MacIntyre, 1998). Evidence from MacIntyre and Charos's preliminary study (as cited in MacIntyre, 1998) pointed out that anxious learners are less willing to communicate when they are given the opportunity to communicate in a natural setting. Similarly, Ely (as cited in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991) asserted that language classroom anxiety tends to be associated with discomfort, unwillingness to volunteer answers, and poor performance in university language classroom settings. As well, Horwitz, Tallon, and Luo (2009) pointed out that foreign language anxiety can cause many students to drop out of language study. They also postpone homework or even skip the class.

Personal Effects

The subjective feelings, psycho-physiological symptoms, and behavioral responses of anxious foreign language learners are essential for consideration of the effects of anxiety on language learning. Many students suffer from a high level of anxiety, which impedes their ability to perform

successfully in foreign language learning, especially in listening and speaking. Price's interviews (as cited in MacIntyre, 1998) revealed that students are very concerned about speaking in front of their peers. Fear of being laughed at, embarrassed, and making a fool of oneself are major concerns of anxious language students when they use the target language for communication. Similarly, Oxford (1990) stated that anxiety can lower students' self-esteem, reduce their confidence in themselves, and lessen their willingness to take risks. Anxiety not only affects foreign language learners' thoughts and behaviors; it also affects their body. According to Gall and Goodwin's study (as cited in Sogunro, 1998), there are many effects of language anxiety on physical symptoms such as lightheadedness, heart palpitations, trembling, sudden feeling of being cold, knots in the stomach, profuse sweating, fainting in extreme cases, wet palms, goose flesh, and excruciating headache.

Considering the above discussion, it is obvious that if anxiety happens during learning, anxious students will perform poorly. However, anxiety may be more strongly aroused by speaking than by learning. Thus, anxiety may also interfere with the student's ability to demonstrate information that she or he does know.

Solutions for Coping with Anxiety

As anxiety can play a strong role in and has many negative effects on language learning, it impedes many students from preforming successfully in the foreign language class. This part of the paper proposes solutions for coping with anxiety, including changing the classroom patterns, positive thinking, and activities that can help students deal with language anxiety and encourage them to become more effective and self-confident language learners.

Changing the Classroom Patterns

One of the useful strategies that teachers can use to reduce or prevent the students' language anxiety is changing their classroom patterns. According to Crookall and Oxford (1991), teachers can do a great deal to help reduce language classroom anxiety by making the classroom as warm, friendly, and relaxed as possible.

In addition, Eschenmann (as cited in Sogunro, 1998) offered some clear classroom conditions that can enhance students' performance and reduce classroom anxiety: suitable heating, lighting, enough ventilation, reduced noise levels, and safety. Furthermore, Crookall and Oxford (1991, p. 142) explained several ways in which the teachers can improve the classroom as follows:

> They can also improve the classroom climate through the use of pair work, small group work, games, simulations, and structured exercises that alter the communication pattern of the classroom. Instead of the all-too-typical format in which communication occurs mainly with the teacher, who highlights and corrects the embarrassed student's errors in front of onlookers, the pattern becomes one of student-to student communication, with the emphasis on conveying meaning rather than underscoring mistakes.

Similarly, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) noted that using various class activities, such as pair work, small group work, games, and role plays, can create a friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere because students feel more relaxed about speaking with a small number of people

than facing the whole class. Likewise, Riasati (2011) suggested that using pair and group work activities in the language classroom can make students feel more comfortable because they communicate in English with their friends and their English skills are the same. Thus, they do not lose face in class when they make mistakes during conversation practice.

In brief, if the suggestions above are followed carefully and consistently, then classroom anxiety is likely to be minimized, and the effectiveness of language learning will be strengthened.

Positive Thinking

Another strategy to be offered is positive thinking. This strategy calls for positive thoughts when students face anxiety. Gall (as cited in Sogunro, 1998, p. 115) advises the positive thinking strategy so that students can increase their self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence, as follows:

I'm going to fail, I'm going to freeze up in the exam room, I'll never get ready in time. . . , one should conceal these negative thoughts by thinking positive thoughts such as I'm going to do just fine on this exam, I'm going to stay as cool as a cucumber in the exam room, I'm not ready now, but I'm going to be ready by exam time.

As well, Kopp (as cited in Sogunro, 1998, p. 116) suggested that the following kinds of positive thinking may be helpful in reducing students' anxiety: "That they may be experiencing some anxiety; that some levels of anxiety and apprehension are common and normal; that they are not alone in these feelings; and that anxiety about doing poorly does not necessarily foreshadow poor results."

In summary, the purpose of this strategy aims to increase the students' self-awareness and to help them to advance and develop a positive self-image in order to enhance their performance and overcome their anxiety.

Class Activities

The activities described below are all designed to help the students deal with language anxiety and study efficiently in the foreign language classroom. Many of the activities are in the form of music, games, and simulations, which can improve the emotional, physiological, and cognitive conditions of the learners.

A large number of the newer approaches to language teaching aim particularly at reducing classroom anxiety through the physical management of the classroom setting. Thus, many researchers have suggested teaching methodologies that can provide the students with a less stressful learning environment; namely, Total Physical Response (TPR), Silent Way, and Suggestopedia. When using TPR, the teacher gives commands to the students to respond physically and verbally (Asher, 1977 as cited in Mathews, 1996). This method is fun, easy, and memorable. It is a good tool for building new vocabulary and can help students with meaning in a real context. It also creates positive thinking, and helps students immediately understand the target language and achieve fluency more rapidly. The Silent Way is suggested by Gattegno (1972 as cited in Mathews, 1996). Here the teachers are required to model new vocabulary and structures, and then the students are asked to repeat and use them immediately. This method makes students feel comfortable and active in the class. Students can improve the vocabulary

in their speaking and increase their confidence in studying. The last technique presented here is Suggestopedia, which requires cheerful classroom decor, music, and yoga (Lozanov, 1979, cited in Sarawit, 1996). With this teaching method, chairs are arranged in a semicircle in order to make the students pay more attention and get more relaxed. This method encourages the students to apply the language more independently and take more personal responsibility for their own learning.

Additionally, Comeau (1998) suggested the use of Guessing Games, guessing the name or occupation of the person, or even what the person is thinking about (Twenty Questions). In this activity, the students are asked to choose a well-known person and describe his or her character and capabilities in front of the class, and they then try to identify the person.

Moreover, Oxford (1990) suggested that five or ten minutes of soothing music can lower learners' anxiety and put them in a more positive mood for learning. As well, poetry and song are the effective language-learning activities that are offered by Maley (1998). In these activities, the learners can read poetry aloud or sing songs as a group without feeling that it is an unnatural process. In addition, laughter can bring happiness to the classroom. Oxford (1990) suggests using laughter to help relax the students by watching a funny movie, reading a humorous book, or listening to jokes.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is obvious that anxiety negatively affects the language learning experience in numerous ways and that reducing anxiety seems to increase language acquisition and the learner's motivation. Foreign language anxiety has many sources; some may be associated with the teacher, the environment, or the student. In order to alleviate and cope with language anxiety in the classroom, effective ways were suggested throughout this paper. Creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, encouraging students' self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence, and providing music, games, and simulations are practical methods that the teacher can use to minimize language classroom anxiety. Teachers should also be mindful of the signs of severe anxiety whenever their students perform. Finally, I hope that English language anxiety will be resolved in the near future and that teachers can provide useful ways to help students achieve their foreign language learning.

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